

Teenage Wasteland by TsundereHamilton

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“Dinner for one, again,” Diane said to herself. She winced. She really must stop talking to herself.

Although her countertop was piled with aging casseroles of various quality, Diane had eyes only for her salad. *Maybe I shouldn't have pressured her to diet*, Diane contemplated as she chewed on a flavorless leaf. *Or maybe it was about growing out her hair*. Diane knew torturing herself about what happened wasn't helping anything—Dr. Finch had said so time and again in their embarrassingly tearful sessions—but it was better than thinking about the other thing. The thing that explained why the women from her church came to her door once a week with their casseroles and pitying looks.

The phone rang, and Diane dropped her fork. Picking it up, she slowly made her way to the phone. It had been a long time since Lloyd had bothered to call ahead when he was going to be late from work. He must have made a big mess of himself this time.

“Holland residence, Mrs. Holland speaking. Who is this?” A gruff, unfamiliar voice answered.

“You're Barbara Holland's mother?”

Diane's heart pounded, the blood rushing to her ears. “Yes, this is she,” she answered, her manicured hands shaking.

“You need to get to the hospital right away. Someone's found your daughter.”

The other end cut off. Diane slammed the phone onto the receiver.

“Fucking lying shitheads,” she spat, “goddamn brats won't let a mother fucking grieve.”

Still, she threw on her coat and started the old Ford's ancient, rattling engine. Diane could never, would never, give up on Barb. Never again.

Diane mentally prepared herself to walk into that too-bright, too-clean (if such a thing could exist) hospital and immediately get turned away by a sympathetic nurse, with another one of those pitying looks she's gotten far too used to over the past couple of days. Instead, a nurse made a beeline for her.

"Mrs. Holland?" she gasped. She was breathless, like she had been running a marathon. Her white gloves were covered in something red.

"Y-yes," Diane said, startled at her abrupt appearance.

"Your daughter is here, and we have some surgeons that think they can save her life. She's not breathing too well and her body temperature is dangerously low, but we think there's a procedure that can save her life. It's going to be invasive though-- highly invasive. We don't know if she'll be the same afterwards. As her legal guardian, do you consent to these procedures?"

Diane blinked and took it all in. The nurse had talked a mile a minute, but she got the gist of what she was saying.

"Of course, absolutely." *Anything to save my little girl.*

"Okay, good. You can wait in the lobby if you like. Just warning you, it's going to be a while."

The nurse already ran off, ugly hospital sneakers making scuff marks on the floor as she sprinted off.

Diane sat at the first chair she saw and tried to take in everything that happened. *She was here, actually here. Not dead and gone-- why did she run away, and why did she choose now to return? Christmas?* That would be surprising-- Barb was never much for sentiment, and every

day she seemed more cynical to Diane, sneering when she picked out homecoming dresses that might bring a nice boy into her orbit. *Was her cynicism a symptom of something greater, something more dangerous?* Diane put her head down and stared at her hands. Her head and heart were pounding.

"Mrs. Holland," a familiar voice interrupted her reverie.

She had been so absorbed by the nurse, by her daughter just maybe being alive, that she didn't even notice that there were three teenagers around Barb's age huddled under blankets, lips blue and teeth chattering. Of course she recognized Nancy from many a playdate, then sleepover, then late night "study session" which Diane secretly hoped were more, well, social occasions.

"Nancy! What are you doing here? And why aren't you in a hospital bed? You look like you're about to catch your death."

"Mrs. Holland, I just had to find Barb. Everyone, everyone said she was dead, she was gone, but I just couldn't believe it. I had to find her myself. And, well, I did. And I wanted to be here when you were called, so here I am."

"How--?" Diane stuttered. "The police had no idea where to even begin. I know you're quite bright, but I'm a little surprised you were able to succeed where they had failed."

Nancy flashed a look to the boys on either side of her and tucked a stray piece of hair behind her ear. "Well, I wouldn't have been able to do it without these guys. Mrs. Holland, meet Steve Harrington and Jonathan Byers."

"Hi, I'm Steve. It's great to finally meet you," a boy with stylish, voluminous hair held out a hand. Diane took it. It was freezing. She

faintly remembered Barb complaining about this boy, about how he took so much time away from Nancy, how he was definitely a bad influence. He didn't seem so bad to Diane right this second.

"And you must be Jonathan. It's a pleasure."

The other boy only smiled sheepishly as he shook her hand. His was just as icy as Steve's.

Just then, the hospital double-doors opened wide, and there stood the infamous Mrs. Byers, in a housecoat totally inappropriate for the blustery December winds.

"What the hell, Jonathan?" she stormed into the waiting room, hair and eyes wild. "I almost lost your brother, I don't want to lose you. Wandering off for hours on your own, in the middle of the night? What the hell were you thinking?"

"Mom," he croaked. "Mom, we found Barb. Barbara Holland. She might actually make it, they think." He gestured towards Diane.

"Holy shit," she said, taken aback. "Pardon my language, uh, Mrs. Holland."

"You can call me Diane," she responded icily. *She's just as crazy as they all said.*

"Okay, Diane. You can call me Joyce. God, I'm so happy for you. I know exactly what you're going through, believe me. I hope the best for your daughter." She reached out to take Diane's hand. Diane flinched.

"Yes, well. Thank you," Diane smiled tightly, making eye contact with the vending machine just to the right of Joyce's shoulder.

"Anyways, Jonathan and I need to get going. Do you want me to stop by the hospital cafeteria and grab you something before I go? The food's not all that bad, you know."

Diane shook her head. "No, but thank you very much. I don't want to put you out of your way, especially this late on a weeknight.

She shrugged. "If you say so," and walked off, clutching her son's shoulder with white knuckles.

"She is right, you know," Nancy said. "She is the one with the best idea of what you're going through."

Diane just stared at her hands. "I just want to see Barb. When will they let me see her?"

A doctor cut into the girl's pale chest.

"What the fuck," he said, as he stared at the mass of wriggling black... *things* swarming her body.

"Fuck, we need to call 'em. The Department of Energy.